

IN THE GARDEN

Public Spaces Meant to Heal

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Public Spaces Meant to Heal



Rob Cardillo for The New York Times

A NEW PATH At the Amazing Port Street Sacred Commons in east Baltimore, abandoned houses near the Amazing Grace Lutheran Church were replaced by a labyrinth, a garden, and a wide-open grassy field, paid for with a grant from the TKF Foundation, run by Tom and Kitty Stoner.

By ANNE RAVER

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SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

COMMUNITY gardens have been around for decades, but open spaces without locked gates are not so common, especially in crime-ridden neighborhoods. Nevertheless, Tom and Kitty Stoner, who run the TKF Foundation, believe it is that very openness that engenders peace and healing.

The foundation, which is named after its founders (T and K for Tom and Kitty, and F for “firesoul,” their word for those who create the garden and keep the fires burning), has helped pay for more than 120 public spaces in the mid-Atlantic region since the Stoners started it 12 years ago. “Open Spaces, Sacred Places,” a book published this month by their Annapolis-based foundation, and written by Mr. Stoner and Carolyn Rapp, recounts the stories of a dozen of those places.

They include healing gardens in hospitals; teaching gardens and a community-built arboretum; a garden planted by inmates at a prison in western Maryland; a columbarium, or place to store ashes after cremation, for the poor in a garden in Falls Church, Va.; and a tree-planting project at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, modeled after Joseph Beuys’s “7,000 Oaks” in Kassel, Germany.



These gardens, which are open to all, vary widely, but they have one thing in common: each is a sacred space, a place that somehow “transforms you, where you are willing to give yourself up,” Mr. Stoner explained last week, sitting in the Japanese-style garden at his home in Annapolis.

For some people, that might mean swinging on a swing, walking a labyrinth or stepping through a portal into a leafy enclosure, as Mr. Stoner and his wife did in London 14 years ago.

Mr. Stoner, who is now 73, said he was “burned out” at the time, after a career spent building a single radio station in Des Moines into the Stoner Broadcasting System, which eventually became part of CBS.

During a trip to London, he and his wife wandered into the Mount Street Gardens near Hyde Park, a little space surrounded on three sides by old town houses.

Suddenly, they were aware of how peaceful they felt. “I said, I think it feels safe here,” Mr. Stoner recalled. Reading the simple inscriptions on plaques attached to benches placed here and there — “little commemorations of moments or a relationship, things like ‘To Suzy, with whom I shared three wonderful years’ ” — he said, “I felt a sense of community.”

They sat on a bench and tried to figure out what made the garden so special. For one thing, it was passing through that portal, from one world to another. And then there were the paths, which led to quiet places where they could rest.

Thinking that they might be able to create something similar at home — “something to do with nature, with healing,” Mr. Stoner said, they spent the next two years talking to landscape architects, psychologists, labyrinth builders and others about what it would take to create a healing landscape. They discovered that there were certain ingredients necessary to a meditative space, Mr. Stoner said. “A portal that transports you to another place, an enclosure to make you feel safe; a path and destination.”

They realized that they wanted to “provide the opportunity for a deeper human experience,” he said, by working with community groups to create gardens that exhibited those characteristics. They decided that each space they helped finance should be an active part of the surrounding community, and open to anyone, without locked gates. Most would be in low-income neighborhoods, where peaceful open spaces are rare, and applicants would be asked to contribute matching funds or in-kind services.

SINCE its founding, TKF has poured about \$7 million into such open spaces, most of them in or around Baltimore, Washington and Annapolis.

In east Baltimore, the Amazing Grace Lutheran Church has received \$40,000 since 1998 to build and maintain the Amazing Port Street Sacred Commons, a labyrinth, garden and a grassy field across the

street from the church, where abandoned houses once stood. Many of those who helped build the Commons are members of the congregation, but the space itself is free of any reference to religion, one of the Stoners' requirements.

That was fine with Jerry Waters, a longtime Baltimore resident and treasurer of the McElderry Park Community Association, which collaborated with the church on the project. But he initially balked at the open-space rule. The vacant lot where they were building the labyrinth had been full of old mattresses, toilets and discarded needles, and he wanted to put up a fence with a locked gate to protect it.

"We had to clean up the needles every day before we started work," Mr. Waters said. "All that time and effort, you didn't want to see it destroyed."

Last week he stood in the labyrinth, recalling those labor-intensive days. "We'd see the drug dealers making their deals in the back of the lot," Mr. Waters said. "But they seemed to respect what we were doing."

As more people began to use the Commons, the dealers went elsewhere and drug users started cleaning up after themselves. "One day, two of them were sitting on the bench, just drinking their beer," he said. "When they left, one of them threw his bottle down, and the other guy said, No, we don't do that here."

Another time, several youths arrived on bicycles, seeking solace after a shooting. They "dropped their bikes and just sat on the labyrinth," said the Rev. Karen L. Brau, the pastor of the Lutheran church, who worked on the project with Mr. Waters. One of the neighbors was going to call the police, Pastor Brau said, but then realized that all they were doing was sitting quietly. The garden "has power because it's open space," she said, and that makes people feel welcome.

Within the confines of a maximum-security prison, an open garden is even more appreciated.

James Carter, a former inmate at the Western Correctional Institution in Cumberland, Md., recalled what the meditation garden he helped plant there in 2001 and 2002 meant to him and fellow inmates. The TKF Foundation spent about \$50,000 on the garden, designed and built with Tony Lawlor, an architect. Mr. Carter said it provided a release not only from the physical walls of the prison, but from internal walls.

“In a prison, you can’t show emotion — it’s weakness; it’s preyed upon,” said Mr. Carter, who ran his own landscaping business before serving 10 1/2 years for armed robbery related to drug use. “I could feel the change of atmosphere when I stepped into the garden. It was almost like you weren’t in prison.”

That experience led Mr. Carter, who was released from prison in March, 2006, and his addiction counselor, Elaine Barclay, to envision a similar garden outside the county courthouse in Elkton, Md. Mr. Carter, who now owns a landscaping company in Phoenix, Md., helped design the garden in collaboration with Mr. Lawlor. TKF has provided \$80,000 for design and construction; members of the community are raising funds locally and locating in-kind services.

Mr. Carter hopes that the garden will be built and maintained by young offenders doing time in community service rather than behind bars.

“Right now the judge only has two options, to let them go or give them time in a correctional facility,” he said. “There’s nothing in between.” Working in the garden instead might change a few lives, he added.

“I’ve been there, I know what happens,” said Mr. Carter, who hopes to work alongside the young people. “If I can keep one or two out of there, then I’m successful.”

